DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 743 EC 303 640

AUTHOR Kappan, David
TITLE On Simulating Blindness.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *Blindness; *Consciousness Raising; *Experiential Learning; *Misconceptions; Safety; Simulated Environment; *Simulation; Training Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Attitudes toward Disabled

ABSTRACT

Many educators in facilitative roles have approached the subject of visual disabilities by constructing activities designed to simulate blindness, using a blindfold or similar device. Participants are subsequently encouraged to perform rudimentary tasks such as eating a meal or moving about with a sighted companion as a guide. Frequently, individuals will emerge from experiences where they have worn a visual occluder with the impression that they have, in essence, experienced what it is like to be blind. Serious misconceptions may be created as the result, due to the potential for creation of false impressions, and the issue of safety while moving about the environment when occluded and without proper training. Simulation participants have had no instruction in the skills of blindness, such as cane travel, and thus their lasting impression is that being blind is hard and there is not much that can be done. Safety issues arise in situations involving stairways, overhanging objects, or narrow passageways. A more favorable approach would be to invite positive community role models who are blind or parents of a child with blindness to the classroom and create an exchange among those in the class and the guest. (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 378 743

"ON SIMULATING BLINDNESS"

by

DAVID KAPPAN

Associate Professor of Special Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

1994

EC 303640

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
David Kappan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

Many educators in facilitative roles have approached the subject of visual disabilities by constructing activities designed to simulate blindness. The process usually involves using a blindfold or similar device to create a situation in which visual input is deleted. Participants are subsequently encouraged to perform rudimentary tasks such as eating a meal or moving about in the environment with a sighted companion as a guide. Issues such as attitudes toward the capabilities of persons who are blind as well as basic safety concerns are seldom addressed to an adequate degree during simulation exercises. It is suggested that misconceptions are often the result of otherwise well-intentioned attempts to replicate the conditions existent with those who are visually impaired.

ON SIMULATING BLINDNESS

by David Kappan

An area of ongoing concern for many individuals directly involved in the field of blindness and visual impairment is that of well-meaning persons in facilitative or instructional roles who will create situations in which they attempt to simulate what it is like to be blind. A segment of this activity may include the introduction of visual occluders. The occluder may be a blindfold, sleep shade, bandana, or any such item which is used to block or restrict visual input. It is ordinarily presumed that most attempts at simulating visual impairments are intended to be constructive in nature; however, the results are often laden with false concepts as they relate to blindness and visual disabilities. Frequently, individuals will emerge from experiences where they have worn a visual occluder with the impression that they have, in essence, experienced what it is like to be blind. Not only is this a misinterpretation; serious misconceptions related to attitudes toward the capabilities of blind or visually impaired persons may be created as the result of such an activity.

When a facilitator or activities leader attempts to simulate blindness, concern arises primarily in two areas: the potential for the creation of false impressions, and secondly, the issue of safety while moving about the environment when occluded and without proper training. On frequent occasions, individuals have indicated that they have participated in a blindfold activity so that they could "experience blindness." The situations mentioned range from having one's vision occluded and being asked to perform a task such as eating an item of food to activities as complex as spending several hours, a day, or an entire weekend under blindfolded conditions. The rationale usually given is that an experience such as this will create understanding or

empathy for what a blind person is experiencing. Albeit that the intent is well-meaning, this type of activity often creates misconceptions of major proportions. When a sighted individual covers his/her eyes with a blindfold or occludes the vision in any other manner, their psychological makeup dictates that this is only a temporary situation and that to return to a visual mode, one merely has to remove the occluder. It is, therefore, illogical to attempt to simulate blindness simply by occluding the vision of a seeing person and assuming that the condition created is the same as being blind. In addition, the composite life experiences and the environmental concepts associated with the subject(s) being simulated are not feasible to replicate. In essence, it is highly misleading to occlude the sight and then infer that this allows the participant to understand what blind people experience. In the cursory exposures that are often constructed, the performance of a relatively simple task such as using an eating utensil with a dish of food is undertaken. Under most circumstances, an activity of this nature is going to be difficult for a sighted person to perform while occluded. However, the individual who is blind has usually had a great deal of time developing and reinforcing these and all the other independent living skills and does not find them as frustrating and difficult to accomplish. Compensations and adaptations normally allow the blind individual to function quite well and the notion that everything is a formidable challenge is not true. In the same sense, this does not infer that blindness is merely a slight inconvenience and that developmental and/or compensatory considerations are not necessary.

Andrews (1992) in a letter to the editor of the BRAILLE MONITOR reacted to an exercise in which a teacher blindfolded his students for a day in an attempt to simulate blindness with the following statement:

> "The people involved will return to seeing at the end of the day and throughout the exercise they know that they can peek or take off their blindfolds at any time. . . . these people have had no instruction in the skills of blindness, what we call alternative techniques, such as cane travel and reading and writing Braille. Consequently most participants are able to perform even the smallest tasks of daily living only with great difficulty or not at all. Thus the lasting impression of most people that take part in such simulations is that being blind is hard, and there isn't much you can do. Their initial fear of the unknown (blindness) is compounded by their experience."

The concern exists that fears and negative attitudes toward persons who are blind may be eventually passed along from teacher to student. As a result of the view that limited success is normally experienced in a short periods of simulated blindness, it is reasonable to presume that teachers who have been involved in these activities may frequently have a tendency to expect less of their blind students. Diminished expectations by society of blind persons undoubtedly means they will be given little chance to compete on an equal basis with their sighted peers. (Andrews, 1992)

Likewise, the issue of safety is a tremendous concern and should not be taken lightly by those who decide to construct a situation in which someone is being asked to move about the environment without utilizing their sense of sight. It is not uncommon, particularly on college or university campuses, for instructors of courses in Special Education or Rehabilitation to construct situations where students are asked or required to participate in simulation activities which may include wearing a vision occluder. The assignments may vary but will usually require that the student use a classmate as a guide while walking about in the environment. It is at this point that the potential for an unsafe or dangerous situation is likely to occur. Situations that may include stairways, overhanging objects, drop-offs, or narrow passageways are examples which require knowledge and skill when providing sighted assistance to

blind travelers. The legal ramifications alone should cause leaders of such activities to consider whether or not asking someone to move about under blindfold conditions without proper training and/or supervision is a prudent and advisable request.

The use of "low vision simulators" which are intended to replicate specific eye conditions or diseases such as cataracts, retinitis pigmentosa, or certain field losses also has the potential for misinterpretation although usually not to the same degree as total occlusion. Furthermore, it has been noted that attempts to simulate impairments other than blindness are commonplace. It is not unusual to observe an individual who has full use of his/her extremities moving about the environment in a wheelchair as part of an activity intended to simulate an ambulatory impairment. Exercises in which participants are asked to place objects in or over their ears in an effort to portray deafness are not uncommon. This dialogue is not meant to address the effect of simulation in areas other than that of the visually impaired; however, it is surmised that many of the preceding concerns may have application to other handicapping conditions, as well.

Additionally, it should be noted that there are a number of colleges and universities that offer degree programs which require extensive skill development under occluded conditions for prospective teachers of blind and visually impaired children and adults. The blindfold experiences offered in these programs should not be confused with the cursory and superficial activities previously mentioned. The college and university training of Orientation and Mobility Specialists as sanctioned by the Association of Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired is an extensive educational procedure. It requires numerous hours of skill development

as part of a total program which prepares professionals in the science of independent travel for the blind and visually impaired. A typical university program will require approximately 60 hours of individualized instruction in the introduction, development, and reinforcement of techniques. The instruction, undertaken while blindfolded, acts as a foundation and when combined with large numbers of observations, teaching methodologies, practicum experiences, and extensive related coursework, provides the prospective teacher with the necessary professional preparation. Throughout the course of study, the relationship between functioning as a sighted person under occluded conditions and that of the blind individual is identified and thoroughly examined.

The question therefore arises, what can educators do to facilitate activities that will enable students to gain the necessary awareness and experience relative to the individual who is blind and visually impaired? Rather than creating situations which may produce misconceptions and safety concerns by occluding sighted persons, it is suggested that a more favorable approach would be to invite positive role models in the community who are blind to the classroom setting and create an exchange among those in the class and the guest. If numbers allow, a panel of individuals who are blind and who represent different backgrounds and modes of mobility (such as cane users and those who travel with a dog guide) may be helpful. Direct contact with individuals who are blind will undoubtedly create the awareness that through various methods of compensatory and/or developmental adjustments, those who are blind can and do contribute to society in meaningful and productive ways. Another activity proposed by Hardman, Drew, Egan & Wolf (1993) in HUMAN EXCEPTIONALITY

suggests that the teacher offer an invitation to a parent or parents of a child with a visual impairment to speak to the class. Prior to the visit, the class members could develop a list of suitable questions relating to areas such as: adaptations within the home, recreational and leisure-time modifications, and possible adjustments made by siblings.

This discourse does not suggest that attempting to simulate blindness is inappropriate under any circumstances, however, unless a person is specifically trained in the educational and/or rehabilitative aspects unique to blindness and professionally trained in the safety features of moving about without the sense of sight, it is recommended that the experiences attempted be of a more passive nature. The "trust walk" situation or a sensory awareness exercise may have their place but should only be attempted after consulting with a person knowledgeable with what is safe and appropriate. Likewise, activities such as allowing students without visual impairments to walk around in a shopping mall or any similar area while carrying a white cane to observe the reaction of the sighted public has the potential for a variety of unfavorable consequences. Information on suitable activities for a situations involving the visually impaired is normally available on both the local and state level through public and/or residential school programs and rehabilitation agencies offering services to individuals with visual disablities.

References

Andrews, D., (1992) "Simulated Blindness Again" Letter to the Editor, BRAILLE MONITOR (May, 1992), National Federation of the Blind, Baltimore, MD, pp. 250-251.

Hardman, M., Drew, C., Egan, M., Wolf, B., (1993) HUMAN EXCEPTIONALITY, 4th Edition, Allyn and Bacon, Needham Heights, MA, pp. 320-322.